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The Missing Link:
Informal Political Elites and Protest in Areas of Limited Statehood.

Patrick Hunnicutt[*] [†]
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Abstract

What explains protest mobilization in areas of limited statehood, where the government struggles to make and enforce rules? We adapt existing theory to explain protest mobilization through a comparative perspective, beginning with the proposition that informal political elites who mediate citizens' interactions with the government in areas of limited statehood represent a crucial but understudied source of political opportunity. We specifically argue that informal political elites who are effective intermediaries between citizens and the state moderate the relationship between grievances and protest at the individual-level. Six months of fieldwork in Liberia substantiates this claim. Leveraging an original, high-frequency household panel dataset, we demonstrate how informal political elites called "community chairpeople" moderate the otherwise positive association between public service shortages and protest. Qualitative data collected through focus groups and interviews provide further evidence of how informal political elites shape protest mobilization in settings where the state is weak.

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What explains protest mobilization in areas of limited statehood (ALS), where the central government struggles to make and enforce rules and lacks a legitimate monopoly on the use of force (Stollenwerk 2018)? Existing theories predict high levels of protest when citizens are aggrieved and doubt that conventional forms of political participation like voting will produce government redress (Gurr 1970; Eisinger 1973; Kitschelt 1986; Harris and Hern 2019), holding constant citizens' access to resources (Jenkins 1983). Thus, protest should be widespread in ALS, where government failures to deliver public goods and services occur alongside unresponsive state institutions which lack legitimacy (Börzel, Risse and Draude 2018). Yet such grievances and limited political opportunities do not always spark protest and other anti-government behaviors in ALS (Risse and Stollenwerk 2018).

This paper offers an alternative explanation of protest which adapts existing theory to incorporate the dynamics of governance in settings where state authority and legitimacy is limited. Informal political elites who govern without statutory authority, such as traditional chiefs (Baldwin 2015), commonly emerge as "intermediaries" who facilitate citizens' interactions with the government when the state is weak (Hönke and Müller 2018). While existing work documents the effect of informal political elites on electoral accountability and public goods provision (Baldwin and Raffler 2019), research to date has not considered how their capacities as intermediaries shapes protest mobilization. We propose informal political elites who effectively demand and elicit government reform on aggrieved citizens' behalf represent an important source of political opportunity. Thus, citizens' perceptions of informal political elites' capacities as intermediaries should moderate the relationship between grievances and protest mobilization. When aggrieved citizens believe that informal political elites can communicate their demands to and secure concessions from the government, they should be less likely to protest.

We construct a high-frequency panel dataset of 390 households located across Liberia's capital city of Monrovia to test our argument. For six consecutive months, empaneled house-

holds were administered a survey measuring their willingness to mobilize for different forms of protest, exposure to various grievances, perceptions of government officials, and perceptions of informal political elites called "community chairpeople." Community chairpeople are local leaders who operate throughout Liberia. Chairpeople often are informally elected and steer communities' interactions with the Liberian government, despite receiving neither pay nor legal recognition from the state. Interviews we conducted with active community chairpeople in Monrovia confirm their role as intermediaries who can potentially redirect citizens' grievances with the government through conventional channels of political participation.

Altogether, we find that community chairpeople who are perceived as effective intermediaries dampen the otherwise positive relationship between public service shortages (i.e., grievances) and protest. We take two steps to address concerns about omitted variable bias in our statistical analyses. First, data from focus groups we conducted help us identify, measure, and specify as covariates the most salient confounds of protest in our study's setting. Second, we employ the sensitivity analysis presented in Cinelli and Hazlett (2020), finding that an omitted variable would overturn our result only if it induced substantially more bias than would omitting a theoretically-relevant covariate we specify. We believe these steps demonstrate a robust conditional association between grievances, informal political elites, and protest.

Our results should generalize under the following conditions. The state must have some capacity for repression, and informal political elites must be capable of holding government officials accountable and have incentives to encourage citizens to seek government reform through means other than protest. These conditions characterize many countries in the Global South, where informal political elites mobilize votes for government officials, personally benefit from maintaining state-society relations, and offer citizens alternative strategies for achieving government concessions (Baldwin 2015). Moreover, our theoretical proposition that informal political elites can expand political opportunity extends far beyond so-called

"failed" states and countries experiencing violent conflict. Over 80 percent of countries globally, including Brazil, Ethiopia, India, and China, contain significant areas of limited statehood wherein citizens deputize non-state actors to engage the government on their behalf (Stollenwerk 2018; Börzel, Risse and Draude 2018; Börzel and Risse 2021).

This article extends existing research on protest mobilization. Foundational theories of protest—many based on the study of social movements in the Global North—implicitly assume sources of political opportunity are confined to state institutions and their agents. We relax this assumption and demonstrate how the local leaders who mediate citizens' interactions with the government shape the dynamics of protest mobilization. In doing so, this article illuminates how existing theories of mobilization can be adapted to explain protest through a comparative perspective.

Theory

What explains protest mobilization in areas of limited statehood, where governments "lack the ability to implement and enforce rules and decisions and/or...do not command a legitimate monopoly over the means of violence" (Börzel, Risse and Draude 2018, 6)? Two common attributes of these settings may shape protest mobilization, holding constant citizens' access to the resources facilitating collective action (Jenkins 1983).

First, low government legitimacy in ALS suggests theories of mobilization rooted in the concept of "political opportunity" hold some explanatory power. Two core ideas underpin these theories: aggrieved citizens are rational actors who use protest alongside other forms of collective action to seek redress, and the institutional environment in which citizens are embedded structures the incentives to participate in different kinds of collective action (Eisinger 1973; Kitschelt 1986; Tarrow 1996; Meyer 2004; Meyer and Minkoff 2004). All else equal, opportunity-based theories of mobilization contend that protest is less likely to emerge in the

presence of conditions which either favor conventional modes of political participation like voting or impose sufficient costs on protesters. For example, institutions of direct democracy are associated with lower levels of protest because they formalize citizens' access to the policymaking process (Fatke and Freitag 2013). The state's capacity to repress dampens protest mobilization by increasing its potential costs (Goldstone and Tilly 2001; Sullivan 2019). Conversely, divisions among elites and the availability of elite allies heighten the probability of protest by increasing the government's tolerance towards protesters' demands (Jenkins, Jacobs and Agnone 2003).

Second, grievance-based theories (i.e., Gurr (1970)) of mobilization may have merit in ALS, given weak states' limited capacities to provide basic goods and services. While recent scholarship more precisely articulates the conditions under which grievances spark protest (Griffin, Jonge and Velasco-Guachalla 2021), their role in mobilizing protesters remains unchanged: grievances motivate citizens to make extrainstitutional demands for reform. Contemporary applications of the this framework attribute protest mobilization to discrete government failures like the inability to address economic crises (Kurer et al. 2019) or reduce police-caused deaths (Williamson, Trump and Einstein 2018).

Scholars have usefully explored how grievances and political opportunity interact, taking cues from earlier research which positions political opportunity as an intermediate variable linking grievances to protest (Eisinger 1973; Kitschelt 1986). For example, Shadmehr (2014) and Juan and Wegner (2019) argue that grievances affect protest mobilization by shaping citizens' expectations of government responsiveness. Harris and Hern (2019) attribute recent protest waves in Africa to poor living conditions and shared beliefs among citizens regarding government responsiveness. Relatedly, Hendrix and Haggard (2015) find that the mobilizing effect of food shortages on protest is limited to democracies that are unlikely to repress public dissent. The interaction of grievances and political opportunities also features throughout recent research on the determinants of political violence (Dyrstad and Hillesund

2020; Nemerever 2021)

However, whether grievances and political opportunity affect protest mobilization remains an active empirical question. This uncertainty partially reflects the lack of systematic evidence documenting how an individual's decision to protest is sensitive to changes in their material conditions and institutional environments over time (Lyon and Schaffner 2021). Moreover, extant research focuses on how "formal" sources of political opportunity condition the effect of grievances on protest. Common measures of political opportunity reference features of state institutions, such as the openness of city governments (Eisinger 1973; Williamson, Trump and Einstein 2018), the qualities of autocrats (Carter and Carter 2021), the presence of elite allies in formal decision-making bodies (Bruhn 2008), the strength of opposition parties (Lebas 2011), the state's capacity to repress (Goldstone and Tilly 2001; Shadmehr 2014; Sullivan 2019), and citizens' perceptions of external efficacy with respect to conventional modes of political participation (Harris and Hern 2019; Dyrstad and Hillesund 2020).

Yet it is likely that actors and institutions which exist outside of the state represent "informal" sources of political opportunity that shape the dynamics of protest mobilization. Indeed, critiques of research in the political process tradition (McAdam et al. 1982; McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly 2003) point out its disproportionate focus on the state institutions, ignoring how societies consist of multiple institutions—some of which exist outside of the state and enable those who are disenfranchised by the government to resist it successfully (Armstrong and Bernstein 2008). This multi-institutional perspective is especially relevant for ALS, where citizens frequently organize systems of self governance (Börzel, Risse and Draude 2018; Börzel and Risse 2021). Despite research documenting how the informal modes of governance citizens organize shape their perceptions of and interactions with the government (Stokes et al. 2014; van der Windt et al. 2019; Magaloni, Diaz-Cayeros and Euler 2019; Baldwin and Raffler 2019), scholars have yet to consider their relationship with protest.

Out argument begins by casting the non-state actors who govern in ALS—often by steering informal institutions (Helmke and Levitsky 2004)—as informal sources of political opportunity. We refer to these actors as "informal political elites." Informal political elites includes a broad range of leaders who rely on some degree of customary authority to govern, from traditional chiefs in Zambia (Baldwin 2013) and *usos y costumbres* (village councils) in Mexico (Magaloni, Diaz-Cayeros and Euler 2019)—whose authority is almost exclusively rooted in customary institutions—to *maliks* (village representatives) in Afghanistan (Murtazashvili 2016) and town chiefs in Malawi (Cammack, Kanyongolo and O'Neil 2009)—whose authority is more hybrid and localized in practice.

Informal political elites often facilitate the flow of information and resources between citizens and the government (Hicken 2011; Hönke and Müller 2018) as "intermediaries" (Hönke and Müller 2018) or "brokers" (Hicken 2011), largely because of their role in mobilizing support for the government. Government officials target reform, like better public services, to garner electoral support across a number of settings (Briggs 2021). In ALS, these officials often have poor information on where additional services are needed and lack the bureaucratic capacity to unilaterally deliver services. Chiefs, community leaders, and other informal political elites can help government officials overcome these challenges—given their knowledge about local problems and ability to mobilize voluntary contributions to state-backed service projects—and sanction unresponsive government officials—given their ability to mobilize voters (Tsai 2007; Hicken 2011; Baldwin 2013, 2015).

Conventional wisdom suggests that informal political elites use their authority to mobilize aggrieved citizens against the government (Migdal 1988; Reno 1998), e.g., by leveraging their local knowledge to construct effective collective action frames (Benford and Snow 2000; Cederman, Gleditsch and Buhaug 2013). Yet informal political elites also complement the state (Baldwin 2015; van der Windt et al. 2019; Henn 2022), even in conflict-affected settings where citizens' grievances with the government may be especially intense (Murtazashvili

2016; Balan et al. 2022). There are often strong incentives for informal political elites to facilitate dialogue between citizens and the government instead of mobilizing anti-government protests. For one, many informal political elites' authority rests on their ability to meet their constituents' demands for reform. It is likely that coordinating with the government to satisfy these demands is more efficient, especially with respect to providing complex public services like improved roads. Additionally, informal political elites invest in their own well-being when they work to help the government respond to citizens' material grievances, since they often reside in the communities they represent (Baldwin 2013, 2015). By the same logic, informal political elites risk incurring the potential costs of protest (e.g., repression) when their constituents mobilize. Facilitating protest mobilization may also harm informal political elites' relationship with government officials, which would undermine their ability to launch future careers in the public sector (De Kadt and Larreguy 2018).

Why would citizens depend on informal political elites to act as intermediaries, instead of the officials elected to represent their interests in formal decision-making processes? In especially rural areas, this decision could be purely functional: informal political elites like traditional chiefs may be the only source of governance. Citizens' preferences for informal political elites may reflect long-standing norms about political participation, as is the case with customary organizations in Afghanistan (Murtazashvili 2016). Citizens also consistently express higher levels of trust in informal political elites than in government officials (Logan and Katenda 2021), making them less likely to directly engage the latter when aggrieved. This discrepancy in trust might reflect how informal political elites often are deeply embedded in the communities they govern and, thus, have stronger incentives to address their constituents' grievances (Baldwin 2015). It may also stem from the factors contributing to the breakdown of state-society relations, such government repression (Desposato, Wang and Wu 2021) and repeated public service shortages (Bodea and LeBas 2016). That is, citizens' negative experiences with the state may underpin their preferences for informal political

elites, and vice versa (Acemoglu et al. 2020).

Informal political elites who are effective intermediaries should expand aggrieved citizens' perceptions of political opportunity and reduce the likelihood of protest, through at least two mechanisms. First, informal political elites who are effective intermediaries directly augment citizens' capacity to hold the government accountable. The effect of informal political elites on electoral accountability and subsequent improvements to public service provision is well documented across numerous settings (Cammack, Kanyongolo and O'Neil 2009; Baldwin 2013, 2015; Baldwin and Raffler 2019; Murtazashvili 2016). It follows, then, that how effective informal political elites are as intermediaries shapes aggrieved citizens' expectations of whether the government will be responsive to their demands absent mobilizing for protest. When aggrieved citizens can communicate their demands to the government via an informal political elite who is an effective intermediary, they should form stronger expectations about government responsiveness. As a result, those aggrieved citizens should be less likely to mobilize for protest. Deputizing informal political elites to achieve the same reforms that protest would demand matches protest's efficacy but avoids its inherent risks, such as experiencing repression.

Second, informal political elites who are effective intermediaries can improve citizens' feelings of external efficacy, which should indirectly expand citizens' perceptions of political opportunity and dampen the likelihood of protest. McClendon and Riedl (2015) and McClendon and Riedl (2021) show how religious leaders stimulate political participation by delivering sermons which emphasize individuals' capacities to make change in the face of extensive social, economic, and political problems. Murtazashvili (2016) similarly finds that informal political elites in Afghanistan improve citizens' perceptions of government effectiveness and responsiveness. When informal political elites boost citizens' external efficacy, they change the calculus for protest mobilization. More externally efficacious citizens should be more likely to resolve their grievances by directly engaging with the government, given

the positive relationship between external efficacy and institutionalized forms of political participation (Finkel 1985).

Foundational theories of protest share one core principle: mobilization occurs when aggrieved citizens believe that conventional forms of political participation are insufficient to change the status quo (Gurr 1970; Eisinger 1973; Kitschelt 1986). In ALS, conventional forms of participation include interacting with informal political elites to elicit government reform. Incorporating how informal political elites mediate state-society relations should further clarify the conditions under which citizens are most likely to mobilize for protest outside of settings where the state is strong.

Accordingly, we argue that informal political elites will moderate the relationship between grievances and protest. In successfully facilitating the flow of information and resources between citizens and the government, informal political elites strengthen citizens' external efficacy and directly communicate citizens' grievances and demands for redress to the government. Both capacities represent an expansion of political opportunity, generating the following hypothesis:

Conditional on perceiving informal political elites as effective intermediaries, aggrieved citizens will be less willing to protest.

Setting

We conduct six months of fieldwork in Liberia's capital city of Monrovia to investigate the relationship between grievances, informal political elites, and protest. This West African country poses a compelling test for our theory because it contains significant areas of limited statehood wherein informal political elites actively mediate citizens' interactions with the government. Liberia experienced two bouts of civil war between 1989 and 2003, causing a tragic loss of life, damaging infrastructure, and eroding state institutions. Political stability

remains tenuous in Liberia. Recent protests have surfaced citizens' discontent with the government and generated anxiety about renewed conflict. Perhaps reflecting these tensions, actors outside of the Liberian government play a major role in maintaining state-society relations. Informal political elites like village chiefs are politically active in Liberia, working with the government to address problems like land disputes (Carter Center 2010). Informal political elites also enjoy higher levels of trust in Liberia than do government officials and institutions. About 70 percent of Liberians express low levels of trust in government officials, and fewer trust the Liberian National Police (BenYishay et al. 2017; Karim 2020). We describe which among Liberia's network of informal political elites are most likely to shape the dynamics of protest below.

Community Chairpeople, Grievances, and Protest Mobilization in Liberia

We focus specifically on informal political elites called "community chairpeople": community leaders active across Liberia. Citizens either organize informal elections to select chairpeople or rely on other customary institutions to appoint them. Once in power, chairpeople serve between two and four years with various term limits.

Community chairpeople emerged during the second Liberian civil war to coordinate public service provision. They helped deliver World Food Programme aid and liaised with UN peacekeeping personnel. As the Liberian National Police regained strength, chairpeople acted as local reporters on issues like sexual violence. Chairpeople also guided international efforts to conduct community outreach and establish local care centers during the 2014-2016 Ebola crisis. Community chairpeople remain active today, helping settle civil disputes, representing community interests when engaging the government, and coordinating responses to flooding during the rainy season. Citizens also rely on chairpeople to manage access to

government-provided services like electricity.

These tasks are delegated to community chairpeople because citizens believe they can hold the government accountable. Chairpeople can uniquely coordinate community resources to resolve government failures. For example, chairpeople will collect small donations from wealthy community members to resolve service shortages like electricity blackouts. Chairpeople also are credible intermediaries because they help mobilize votes for government officials during election years.

Along what dimensions are chairpeople similar to other informal political elites who work as intermediaries? Paramount, clan, and town chiefs are traditional leaders who work alongside community chairpeople in Liberia but are located higher in the country's hierarchy of informal governance. These chiefs are paid as civil servants that the Liberia government formally recognizes under its 1986 constitution (see Chapter VI, Article 56), whereas community chairpeople receive neither legal recognition nor pay from the state.

A key similarity between Liberian chiefs and community chairpeople is that both leaders' authority partially stems from elder councils. These customary political institutions were responsible for appointing chiefs in pre-war Liberia when succession based on kinship was unclear or contested. Elder councils also oversee the election or appointment of community chairpeople. For example, the elder council of Monrovia's Slipway community intervened in the election of a new community chairperson following electoral violence (The New Dawn 2019). Chairpeople also defer to the elder council when adjudicating serious disputes within the community.

Community chairpeople are similar to other informal political elites who operate at the community-level outside of Liberia. Malawian town chiefs share many characteristics with chairpeople: they are more prominent in urban settings, co-exist alongside other traditional leaders, receive neither pay nor legal recognition from the government, and manage their community's interactions with the state (Cammack, Kanyongolo and O'Neil 2009). The

same parallels can be drawn between chairpeople and *maliks* (village representatives) in rural Afghanistan, who are elected by community members, derive their authority from informal modes of governance, and broker their community's interests to the government (Murtazashvili 2016).[1]

From January to February 2020, we conducted three focus group discussions which illuminate the process by which Liberian citizens decide to protest when aggrieved. Our research team recruited participants from three communities in Monrovia via a random walk protocol beginning at the location of major infrastructure (e.g., electricity transformers). All three communities reportedly experienced significant grievances in the form of public services shortages in prior years but varied in their mobilization for protest. Men and women between the age of 18 and 60 participated in the focus groups and were compensated for their time. We present two key lessons from these focus groups below.

First, public service shortages such as electricity blackouts are a common and salient grievance among Liberian citizens. Less than 20 percent of Liberians have reliable access to electricity. Many focus group participants blamed service shortages on the government: "the Government is preventing her citizens from accessing basic services" (FGD 1, R5). Perhaps unsurprisingly, then, service shortages frequently precede protest in Liberia. Some focus group participants claimed "[t]he reason why people are protesting in Liberia almost every month is because the government is not providing those basic services to her citizens" (FGD 1, R2). Protesters experiencing shortages block major roads to draw the attention of government officials who can pressure service providers to act.

Second, while some participants argued protest was the most effective means of addressing grievances like public service shortages, others preferred deputizing their community chairperson. Participants who condoned protest focused on its ability to bring "immediate"

[1] We acknowledge that significant variation exists in the role, authority, and title of the informal political elites who exist within networks of informal governance and later explore how the unique features of chairpeople may affect the generalizability of our results.

government action (FGD 1, R5) because protest grabs the government's attention (FGD 1, R4 and FGD 3, R3 and R5), "tells the government that there is an alarming situation" (FGD 2, R2), and lets "[the government] know that it is their responsibility to provide these services" (FGD 2, R4). Some participants who discounted protest cited the complicated history of non-violent demonstrations and civil conflict in Liberia (Winfrey 1979). Others argued that deputizing chairpeople to seek government redress was as effective as protest. These participants claimed they would rely on their chairperson after contacting the government: "if [we] don't have toilet, or other basic things like garbage [services]...let the community meet the community chairman...that is why we have a community chairman" (FGD 1, R1). Some participants went as far as suggesting that unsuccessfully achieving redress via their chairperson immediately preceded protest: "we will contact the government through our community chairperson...[and] if there is no redress, we will protest" (FGD 3, R5). Only one focus group participant named their chairperson when asked who organized protest (FGD 1, R3), and more depicted chairpeople as an alternative strategy for resolving grievances.

These responses suggest that community chairpeople represent an informal source of political opportunity in Liberia and, thus, may moderate the relationship between grievances and protest mobilization. When perceived as effective intermediaries, community chairpeople increase the opportunity cost of protest because they can help resolve citizens' grievances without possibly triggering government repression.

Methods

We utilize multiple sources of data from our fieldwork to test whether community chairpeople influence protest mobilization as hypothesized above. We first employ novel household panel data to estimate how citizens' perceptions of chairpeople moderate the association between public service shortages and protest. Then, we use interviews conducted with acting

chairpeople in Monrovia to further situate them in the dynamics of protest mobilization.

Quantitative Analysis

We collected survey data from 390 different households across 15 communities in Monrovia between January 2020 and July 2020. Communities were selected purposively, to capture variation in household income. Households were recruited using a random walk protocol starting from a piece of major infrastructure, which should produce an as-if random sample of households because it prevents enumerators from selectively recruiting participants. Appendix A contains additional information on our sampling method.

Then, once a month for six consecutive months, enumerators administered the same survey to households via mobile phones.[2] Using mobile phones helped us overcome constraints that can interrupt longitudinal data collection in ALS. For example, we were able to adjust our data collection protocol and remotely continue research activities after the onset of COVID-19 in Liberia, as Appendix B clarifies. Appendix D discusses concerns about response bias and attrition that are common to mobile-phone based surveys.

Measurement

Our dependent variable is survey respondents' stated willingness to mobilize for protest. Respondents were asked how willing they would be to participate in a protest march ("Imagine that someone was trying to organize a protest where you would hold a placard and march. How willing would you be to participate in this protest?") and to block a major road ("Imagine that someone was trying to organize a protest where you would burn tires on the road and block traffic. How willing would you be to participate in protest?"). Responses were recorded on a five-point Likert scale ("Very willing" to "Very unwilling"). We collapse responses to both survey questions into a binary variable indicating whether a respondent was willing to

[2] Table E3 contains summary statistics for survey measures used in our analysis.

mobilize for either form of protest to form our primary outcome measure, though we explore below whether our results are sensitive to different operationalizations of this variable.

One concern with our dependent variable is an individual who is willing to protest may not mobilize in practice, because stating some willingness to protest does not imply the same costs as mobilizing. We argue that the unique political moment in which our study took place helps attenuate this concern, as does the history of protest in Liberia. Data collection began in February 2020, following a series of repressed demonstrations in Monrovia. The opposition party leader who organized these protests later fled to Sierra Leone. Unsuccessful attempts to extradite him followed. These events heightened political tensions in the capital, and it is possible these heightened tensions made study participants attach higher costs to expressing anti-government sentiment, such as stating some willingness to protest. For example, many focus group participants were hesitant to express their political views at first, fearing that we would post group recordings to social media. Survey respondents faced the same dilemma, even as enumerators reaffirmed their anonymity. It is possible that survey respondents who were sufficiently aggrieved to protest did not express as much in an attempt to avoid the government repression they just witnessed. More broadly, many study participants were hesitant to fully condone protest as a tool for extracting concessions from the government because protests against proposed price increases on imported rice led to the coup preceding Liberia's first civil war. This history suggests study participants could have additionally associated social costs with publicly expressing support for protest. Therefore, we believe stating some willingness to protest in our study's setting is not just "cheap talk." Nonetheless, we encourage readers to interpret our quantitative results as upper-bounds, given that not all those who express some desire to protest will subsequently mobilize.

We operationalize grievances using respondents' exposure to three public service shortages over the previous month: electricity blackouts, water shortages, and shortfalls in solid waste collection. These shortages are easily attributable to government actors in Monrovia,

including the Liberia Electricity Corporation (electricity), the Liberia Water and Sewer Corporation (water), and the Monrovia City Corporation (solid waste). Survey respondents reported whether each service was available when they tried to access it over the past month. We take a count of the total services respondents could not access (0-3) as our primary measure, and specify additional measures of shortages as robustness checks. We discuss common causes of these shortages in Appendix B.

We asked respondents to evaluate their community chairperson along two dimensions that should approximate their ability as intermediaries: their efficacy ("How confident are you that your community chairperson can fix a problem in your community?") and their interests ("How confident are you that your community chairperson has the same interests as you?"). Responses to these questions were recorded on a five-point Likert scale ("Very confident" to "Very unconfident"). We sum how effective and representative respondents believe their chairperson to be as our primary measure, resulting in a score that ranges from zero to eight. As a covariate, we similarly measure respondents' evaluations of district representatives—officials elected to the Liberian legislature who constitute a formal source of political opportunity. Figure E1 visualizes variation in respondents' experience of service shortages and chairperson-evaluations.

Estimation

We use two-way fixed effects regressions to estimate how respondents' evaluations of their chairperson moderates the association between experiencing public service shortages and stating some willingness to protest. A generalization of our specification is

$$y_{it} = \alpha + \gamma_1 Service_{it} + \gamma_2 Evaluation_{it} + \gamma_3 Service_{it} \times Evaluation_{it} + \boldsymbol{\beta}\mathbf{X}_{it} + \theta_i + \delta_t + \epsilon_j \quad (1)$$

where y indicates whether respondent i was willing to mobilize for protest in survey wave t; γ_1 represents the effect of experiencing an additional service shortage when respondents report no change in the evaluation of their community chairperson; γ_2 measures the effect of respondents' evaluations of community chairpeople when they report no change in their exposure to service shortages; γ_3 measures how the effect of additional service shortages on protest varies over changing evaluations of community chairpeople; $\mathbf{X}$ is a matrix of time-varying controls (more below); θ_i is a participant fixed effect; and δ_t is a wave fixed effect. We cluster standard errors at the community-level (ϵ_j), since respondents' willingness to mobilize for protest likely is not independently and identically distributed within communities (Abadie et al. 2023).

Addressing Alternative Explanations

Our panel data allow us to specify survey wave and participant fixed-effects to control for time-invariant differences between participants like tribal affiliation. Therefore, the inferential strength of our analysis depends on specifying the correct set of time-varying covariates possibly endogenous to the relationship between service shortages, community chairpeople, and protest.[3] We control for respondents' income, perceptions of protest's efficacy, evaluations of elected officials called district representatives, expectations of violent repression, and the social obligation to protest following feedback about protest mobilization from our focus groups. Each should be endogenous to our theoretical relationship of interest.[4]

We also subject our results to the omitted variable bias sensitivity analysis presented in Cinelli and Hazlett (2020). This analysis allows researchers to quantify how strong an omitted variable would need to be to overturn their results, in relation to how much bias omitting a theoretically-relevant covariate would induce. Results from this sensitivity analysis are

[3]We also assume linear additive effects (Imai and Kim 2019).

[4]Controlling for respondents' social obligations to mobilize for protest additionally precludes the possibility that community chairpeople influence protest mobilization via their impact on a community's social capital, which Zhuang, Wang and Li (2023) link to lower levels of protest in China.

particularly useful for studies lacking a design-based identification strategy because they discipline the discussion about conditional ignorability. If a potential confound only nullifies our results when it induces significantly more bias than the covariates we specify would induce as omitted variables, then we can be more confident that any conditional association between public service shortages and protest we estimate is not spurious.

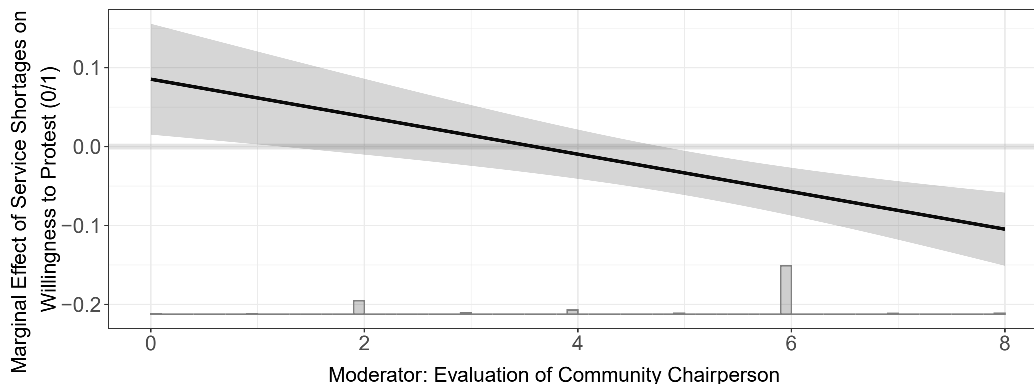
Results

Effective community chairpeople moderate the relationship between public service shortages and citizens' willingness to protest, substantiating our argument about grievances, informal political elites, and protest mobilization. The association between experiencing additional service shortages and stating some willingness to protest decreases as respondents form more positive evaluations of their chairperson (Figure 1). Respondents exposed to service shortages become 2.4 percentage points less willing to protest when their chairperson-evaluations increase by a single point, relative to respondents who are similarly exposed to service shortages but report no increase in their chairperson-evaluations. Therefore, moving from a slightly negative to slightly positive chairperson-evaluation dampens the positive correlation between service shortages and protest we observe among respondents whose chairperson-evaluations are very poor. These results are robust to different measures of service shortages, chairperson-evaluations, and when we measure willingness to protest as an index score (Figures E3a and E3b).

We perform diagnostic tests interrogating the assumptions underlying multiplicative interaction models (Hainmueller, Mummolo and Xu 2019). Overall, we are confident that our results are not the product of unreasonable extrapolation and that the conditional relationship between service shortages and willingness to protest is linear (see Appendix D).

Do elected government officials similarly attenuate the association between respondents'

Figure 1: Effective community chairpeople moderate the association between service shortages and protest.



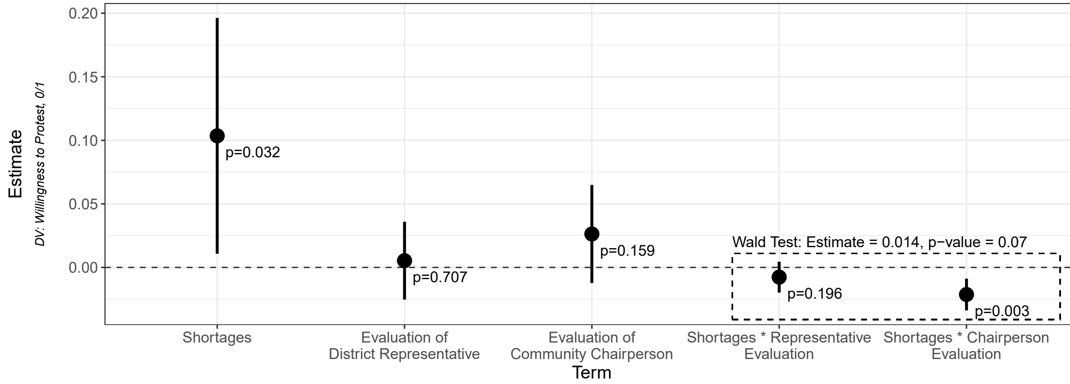
Note: We estimate the conditional association between service shortages and respondents' willingness to protest using an OLS regression. Ninety-five percent confidence intervals are displayed. Vertical bars on the x-axis represent the distribution of respondents' chairperson evaluations.

experience of service shortages and willingness to protest? We investigate this question in two ways. First, we re-estimate our primary specification but include an additional interaction between service shortages and respondents' evaluations of their district representatives. Second, we interact respondents' experiences of service shortages with a composite measure of political opportunity recording whether respondents evaluated both their chairperson and district representative positively, either positively, or neither positively. If the negative conditional association between services shortages and protest only holds for levels of this composite measure where chairpeople are positively evaluated, then we can be more confident that informal political elites are necessary to explain protest mobilization in ALS.

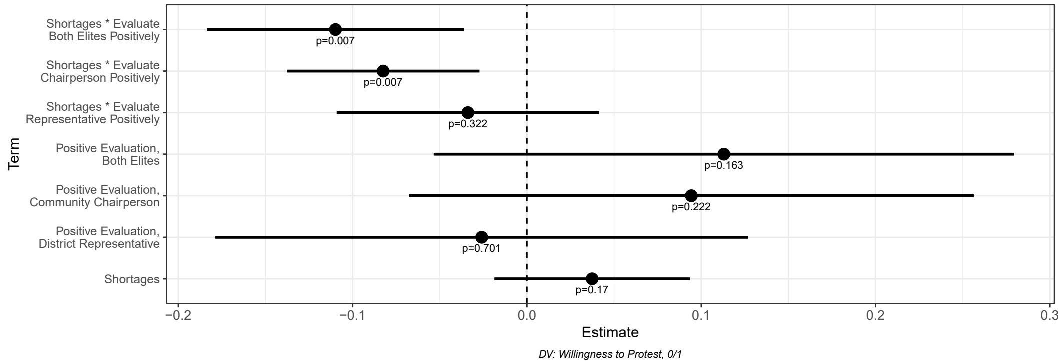
The conditional relationship between services shortages and protest Figure 1 visualizes cannot be explained without the political opportunity effective community chairpeople provide. Effective district representatives do not moderate respondents' willingness to protest after they experience additional shortages, at the conventional level of significance (Figure 2a). The point estimate for the representative-shortage interaction is nearly three percentage points smaller than the chairperson-shortage interaction, though we can only reject the null

Figure 2: Comparing formal and informal sources of political opportunity.

(a) Effective community chairpeople moderate the association between service shortages and protest, but effective district representatives do not.



(b) Effective community chairpeople *independently* moderate the relationship between service shortages and protest.



Note: We estimate the conditional association between service shortages and respondents' willingness to protest using an OLS regression. Ninety-five percent confidence intervals are displayed. The dashed box on Figure2a encapsulates the two interaction terms included in our Wald Test for equivalence. Results from this Wald Test are displayed above the black dashed box.

hypothesis that both interactions are identical at the 10-percent level. Figure 2b shows that respondents who experience additional service shortages and form stronger evaluations of their chairperson alone appear eight percentage points less likely to protest, compared to respondents who report no improvement in either source of political opportunity and experience additional shortages. Forming stronger evaluations of both chairpeople and district representatives increases this point estimate by approximately three percentage points.

Sensitivity Analysis

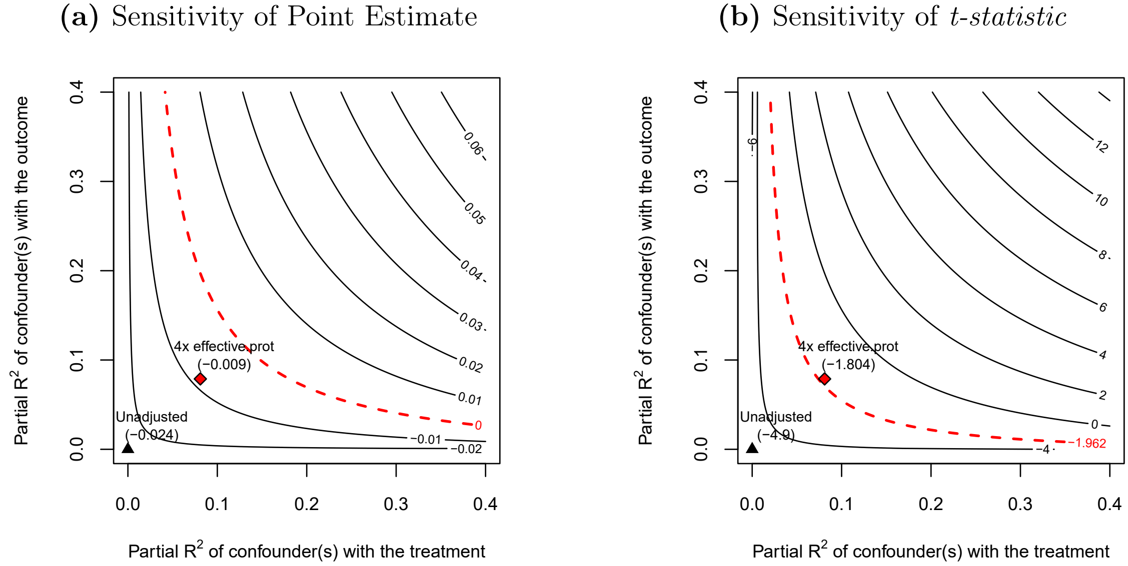
We implement the omitted variable bias sensitivity analysis proposed in Cinelli and Hazlett (2020). This analysis estimates the proportion of residual variance in both the treatment and the outcome an omitted variable would need to explain to problematically change an estimated treatment effect. To help with interpretation, the analysis benchmarks the strength of a potential confound against a theoretically-relevant covariate that would be a significant source of bias if it was an omitted variable. We benchmark our sensitivity analysis against respondents' perceptions of protest's efficacy.

To nullify our core result, an unobserved confound would need to explain more than 7.6% of residual variance in both the interaction between respondents' experience of services shortages and reported chairperson-evaluations and their willingness to protest (Table E5). An unobserved confounder 4 times as strong as the efficacy of protest would be as an omitted variable would not change the sign of the interaction between service shortages and chairperson-evaluations (Figure 3a). An unobserved confound of the same strength would only just nullify our main result at the conventional level of statistical significance (Figure 3a).

These results are insightful because the perceived efficacy of protest would induce significant bias as an omitted variable. Focus group participants who condoned protest often cited its efficacy. Respondents' perceptions of protest's efficacy also explains more variation in their willingness to protest than do the remaining covariates we specify (t-statistic=5.13). Moreover, there are strong conceptual reasons to believe that the perceived efficacy of protest is very endogenous to our relationship of interest. Respondents who believe protest is effective might live in a communities with a history of protest that the government has sanctioned by inducing service shortages. The same respondents also may be more likely to protest because they believe their community chairperson is an ineffective intermediary, as our argument suggests. With our intimate knowledge of the study's setting, we struggle to think

Figure 3: Omitted Variable Bias Sensitivity Plots

(a) Sensitivity of Point Estimate **(b)** Sensitivity of *t-statistic*



Note: Figure 3a demonstrates the sensitivity of the interaction between respondent's exposure to service shortages and chairperson-evaluation to different levels of unobserved confounding. The dashed red line represents the level of confounding at which the unadjusted point estimate we observe (plotted as a black triangle) would be equal to zero. Figure 3a demonstrates the sensitivity of the *t-statistic* for the interaction between respondent's exposure to service shortages and chairperson-evaluation to different levels of unobserved confounding. The dashed red line represents the level of confounding past which the unadjusted *t-statistic* we observe (plotted as a black triangle) observe would be statistically insignificant at the conventional level. The red diamonds "*4x effective.prot*" denotes how our estimated treatment effect (and its *t-statistic*) would change in the presence of an omitted variable four-times the strength of the efficacy of protest.

of another confound that is neither differenced out via our fixed effects nor included in our battery of covariates and is approximately 4-times more endogenous to our relationship of interest than the perceived efficacy of protest.

Of course, we caution readers against drawing strong causal conclusions from our analysis. Disentangling the endogeneity between grievances, political opportunity, and protest is highly complex. We cannot guarantee that no confound 4-times stronger than the efficacy of protest exists, or that some combination of omitted variables are cumulatively 4-times more confounding than the efficacy of protest would be as an omitted variable. However, we believe our data collection strategy and this sensitivity analysis demonstrate a robust conditional association between public service shortages, informal political elites, and protest mobilization.

Mechanisms

The negative conditional association between service shortages, community chairpeople, and protest we estimate may reflect how aggrieved citizens deputize their chairperson to elicit government reform on their behalf. However, it is possible that our main result stems from an observationally-equivalent mechanism: aggrieved citizens exiting formal political processes entirely. Early discussions regarding the relationship between formal and informal governance couch this mechanism in a broader logic of substitution, depicting informal political elites as competitors with the state for citizens' loyalty and resources (Migdal 1988; Reno 1998).

We extend our main analysis in two ways to determine whether this exit mechanism has empirical support. First, we test whether effective community chairpeople moderate the association between service shortages and two other attitudes captured in our survey: respondents' tax morale and perceptions of corruption. One way aggrieved citizens might exit formal political processes is by evading tax payments (Clark, Golder and Golder 2017). Effective informal political elites could accelerate this form of exit by providing citizens an alternative source of public goods and, thus, eroding the social contract between citizens and the state (Bodea and LeBas 2016). Citizens may also form stronger perceptions of government corruption when aggrieved (Riley and Chilanga 2018), and effective informal political elites could intensify this response. For example, citizens may interpret their continued experience of service shortages as a sign that even the informal political elites they perceive as effective intermediaries cannot navigate the barriers to public service provision corruption creates (Pandey 2010). Forming stronger perceptions of government corruption should precede aggrieved citizens' decisions to exit formal political processes by shaping citizens' perceptions of government legitimacy (Levi and Sacks 2009).

We find little quantitative evidence of effective community chairpeople driving aggrieved respondents to exit politics altogether. The conditional association between respondents'

Table 1: Effective community chairpeople do not appear to encourage aggrieved citizens to exit formal political processes.

	DV: Tax Evasion[1]	DV: Gov't is Corrupt[2]
Service Shortages (0-3)	0.05	0.03
	(0.04)	(0.04)
Evaluation of Community Chairperson (0-8)	0.04	0.05^{**}
	(0.02)	(0.01)
Evaluation of District Representative (0-8)	-0.01	-0.12^{***}
	(0.01)	(0.01)
Expect Repression (0/1)	-0.13^{*}	-0.19^{**}
	(0.05)	(0.06)
Income (0-9)	0.00	-0.01
	(0.01)	(0.01)
Shortages×Evaluation of Chairperson	-0.02^{*}	-0.03^{**}
	(0.01)	(0.01)
R^2	0.44	0.71
Adj. R^2	0.27	0.63
Num. obs.	1794	1728
N Clusters	15	15

Note: $^{*}p<0.05$; $^{**}p<0.01$; $^{***}p<0.001$

[1] ***Tax Evasion:*** *we ask respondents to indicate whether they should pay less, the same, or more in taxes to receive better services from the government. We collapse these responses into a dummy variable that takes a value of 0 if respondents are not willing to pay additional taxes and a value of 1 if respondents are willing to pay additional taxes.*

[2] ***Gov't is Corrupt:*** *we ask respondents how corrupt they think their district representative is, on a five-point Likert scale. We collapse these responses into a dummy variable that takes a value of 0 if respondents believe their district representative is not corrupt and a value of 1 if respondents think their district representative is corrupt.*

exposure to service shortages, chairperson evaluations, and willingness to evade future tax payments is negatively signed and statistically significant, as is the conditional association between respondents' exposure to service shortages, chairperson evaluations, and perceptions of government corruption (Table 1). These results are consistent with our findings in Figure 2b. If effective informal political elites cause aggrieved citizens to disengage from politics, then we should see aggrieved respondents in our sample stating an even higher willingness to protest when they positively evaluate their community chairperson and negatively evaluate their district representative. Yet we find the opposite: aggrieved respondents who negatively evaluate their district representative state a lower willingness to protest as they form more positive evaluations of their chairperson.

Second, we interview acting community chairpeople from the 15 communities included in our survey to further explore whether informal political elites cause aggrieved citizens to exit politics. In total, we interviewed 12 chairpeople in our research team's field office in August 2020 to ensure their privacy and safety.[5] Interviewees were presented with prompts inquiring about how they would react to major government failures in their community that, left unaddressed, could spark protest. How chairpeople envisioned their reaction to these government failures further illuminates the relationship between grievances, informal political elites, and protest mobilization.

When asked how they would respond to two costly government failures underpinning citizens' grievances with the Liberian government—unsolved violent crimes and prolonged electricity blackouts—chairpeople overwhelmingly expressed a willingness to coordinate with state actors despite personal frustrations with the government. For instance, one chairperson reported it was "so hard...to get in contact with government officials" because his district representative had "neglected the whole district" in recent years (Interview 1). This same chairperson promoted "engaging the government constructively" rather than encouraging the community to stage a protest in response to a prolonged electricity blackout (Interview 1). Furthermore, he would do community outreach to "educate" citizens about the government's limitations in restoring electricity quickly (Interview 1).

Relatedly, another chairperson described his role as an informal intermediary meant to facilitate dialogue between aggrieved citizens' and the government. When asked what he would do if a major crime occurred in his community, he responded: "I would encourage my citizens, especially those [suspects] involved, to abide by the rules of the law...because this country is a country of law" (Interview 2). His statement is representative of how

[5]Interviewees also were reassured of the research team's independence from the government, to minimize social desirability bias. For example, the person enumerating the interview would state "we are not government people" while obtaining informed consent from the interviewee. We also believe conducting the interviews in the research team's field office helped minimize social desirability bias, because interviewees could not be observed as research participants.

other chairpeople responded to these scenarios: e.g., “give the police a chance...[because] you don’t sabotage police investigations” (Interview 3), or “educate the community to understand that..[when a suspect] is not guilty...you can’t kill them” (Interview 4).

Interviewees’ responses to prompts about protest further underpin how community chairpeople represent an informal source of political opportunity for aggrieved Liberians. Even though their opinions of protest diverged—some equated it to violence that “brings chaos” (Interview 5) while others emphasized citizens’ “right to protest” (Interview 3)—each chairperson claimed they would intervene to redirect their communities’ grievances through formal political channels. Responses ranged from encouraging citizens to resolve their grievances “diplomatically” (Interview 6) to ensuring protesters were allowed to “speak...within the confines of the law” (Interview 2). Chairpeople who neither condemned nor condoned protest outright believed negotiating with the government would be more effective, stating the “best thing is dialogue” (Interview 4) because “there are so many ways that you can engage the government” (Interview 1). One chairperson bluntly claimed that ineffective chairpeople cause aggrieved citizens to protest: “If you see other communities protesting, it means that chairperson is not guiding that particular community” (Interview 7).

These interviews, while limited in their scope, generate evidence that is consistent with our statistical analyses and theory. Chairpeople depict themselves as intermediaries who work to communicate aggrieved citizens’ demands for reform through formal political channels. Chairpeople who intervene during protest mobilization do not report encouraging aggrieved citizens to disconnect from the government entirely. In doing so, community chairpeople exemplify how informal political elites represent a source of political opportunity that shape the dynamics of protest mobilization in ALS.

Discussion & Conclusion

This study generates new insights about grievances, political opportunity, and protest mobilization. Conceptually, it extends theories of protest to account for the dynamics of governance in settings where state capacity is limited. Empirically, it leverages fieldwork from a novel setting to demonstrate how informal political elites both constitute an important source political opportunity and moderate the relationship between public service shortages and protest. That Liberian district representatives appear unrelated to aggrieved Liberians' decisions to protest highlights one of this manuscript's key contributions. Formal sources of political opportunity are insufficient to explain why some aggrieved Liberians are more likely to protest than others. Addressing this uncertainty requires adapting current theories of protest to incorporate how informal political elites structure citizens' interactions with the government when the state is weak.

Though we study protest in a novel geographic and political setting, our results further develop core insights from the existing literature on mobilization. For example, scholars depict the relationship between political opportunity and protest mobilization as curvilinear (Eisinger 1973; Tilly 1978). Informal political elites likely make this relationship more non-linear because they emerge in settings where opportunity-based theories predict high levels of protest: political systems where governments tolerate dissent sometimes but not others and citizens struggle to directly shape the policymaking process but do not feel completely disenfranchised. Thus, the effectiveness of informal political elites may be especially useful to explain variation in protest within moderately-open and moderately-closed political systems.

Three scope conditions bound our theory and results. First, government officials must be sensitive to informal political elites' demands for reform. Second, government officials must have some capacity for repression. Finally, informal political elites must have some incentive to encourage aggrieved citizens to seek reform through means other than protest.

These scope conditions characterize many countries in the Global South. For example, village chiefs in Zambia govern locally, coordinate public goods provision with government officials who depend on them for mobilizing votes (Baldwin 2015), and may offer citizens an alternative path to reform given the state's proclivity for repression (Amnesty International 2021). Similarly, customary leaders in rural Afghanistan (Murtazashvili 2016), town chiefs in Malawi (Cammack, Kanyongolo and O'Neil 2009), and informal political organizations in Mexico (Magaloni, Diaz-Cayeros and Euler 2019) and China (Tsai 2007) all help citizens secure public services and hold government officials accountable in contexts where repression is not uncommon (Bagozzi, Berliner and Welch 2021).

Research clarifying what incentivizes informal political elites to redirect citizens' grievances through state institutions would help identify other settings where our theory and results may hold. One plausible explanation in Liberia is that violent conflict influenced community chairpeople's disposition towards the state, such that they became more inclined to encourage aggrieved citizens to engage with the government instead of protesting against it. Exposure to wartime violence can increase citizens' political participation (Blattman 2009) and preferences for state authority (Blair 2022). It is possible that the legacy of violence in Monrovia, where many witnessed fighting (Vinck, Pham and Kreutzer 2011), shapes chairpeople's relationships with the government today. Of course, this explanation limits the scope of our contribution because it suggests informal political elites will function as complements of the state only in settings that have experienced violent conflict.

Yet there are two more generalizable reasons why informal political elites may choose to redirect citizens' grievances through state institutions. First, informal political elites may use the social capital they accrue during their tenure to launch careers in the public sector. Traditional chiefs in Cameroon have sought out formal position in regional governing bodies (Dougueli 2020), and a subset of traditional chiefs in Liberia (Tokpah 2019) and South Africa (De Kadt and Larreguy 2018) head de-facto lobbying groups that represent

traditional leaders in formal political processes.

Second, informal political elites may be more likely to reduce aggrieved citizens' willingness to protest when their relationship with the government is formally recognized. Henn (2022) demonstrates that traditional leaders in Africa function as complements of the state when their role is specified in national constitutions. This institutional arrangement may reproduce the same incentives which result in community chairpeople functioning as complements of district representatives in Liberia, as we show above. Yet such formalization may be unnecessary: Murtazashvili (2016) shows that Afghani *maliks* whose relationship with the government is not formalized complement the state.[6]

One important aspect of our study is its urban setting. The incentives for informal political elites to work as intermediaries may be far weaker in more rural locations where the state struggles to project power. Thus, our results may not generalize outside of the urban and periurban areas surrounding many capital cities in sub-Saharan Africa.

Our data also cannot precisely explain why citizens perceive community chairpeople to be more effective than government officials when it comes to addressing their grievances. We suspect this perception stems from the acute weakness of the Liberia state in the post-conflict period (Blair 2020) and, as a result, citizens' subsequent exposure to repression and public service shortages. It is plausible these grievances undermined citizens' trust in government via the feedback mechanism articulated in Acemoglu et al. (2020). Our focus groups also suggest that norms about political participation may influence citizens' preferences for community chairpeople. Recall that some respondents said they would deputize their chairperson to resolve a service shortages because that is precisely what chairpeople exist to do. However, we caution that these explanations are preliminary. The relationship between informal political elites and the state does not follow a clear logic of substitution or

[6]Formalizing the linkages between informal political elites and the state may also backfire; see Baldwin and Mvukiyehe (2015), for example.

complementarity (van der Windt et al. 2019; Acemoglu et al. 2020), and other fieldwork we have conducted in Liberia suggests that citizens do not always trust their chairperson more than the government.

These limitations notwithstanding, our study makes two contributions. First, we advance empirical research on how grievances and political opportunity interact to explain protest mobilization. Our novel data collection strategy tracks monthly variation in citizens' grievances and perceptions of political opportunity, allowing us to begin disentangling the dynamics of protest mobilization at the micro-level.

Second, we demonstrate how traditional theories of mobilization can be extended to explain protest through a comparative perspective. Our theory articulates how informal political elites like traditional chiefs represent an important source of political opportunity in areas of limited statehood, even though they are not part of the government themselves. Importantly, the explanatory power of our theory is not confined to conflict-affected settings: over 80% of countries around the world contain significant areas of limited statehood (Stollenwerk 2018). It is plausible that informal political elites have emerged and actively mediate citizens' interactions with the government in these settings, such that they constitute an important source of political opportunity future studies of protest should consider.

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Online Appendices

"The Missing Link: Informal Political Elites and Protest in Areas of Limited Statehood."

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A Sampling

We worked with a Liberian research organization—the Center for Action Research and Training, Liberia—to construct the six-month long panel dataset used in our study. This panel dataset contains information from residents of the Greater Monrovia area, spread across 15 different communities. The research team selected communities with the intent of creating a panel consisting equally of low and high-income households in Monrovia. Recruitment to this panel and data collection proceeded as follows:

- Enumerators recruited thirty-five respondents per community. Twenty were randomly selected to participate in the monthly study; fifteen were used to replenish the panel given attrition.

- Respondents were selected using a random walk protocol, whereby enumerators recruited study participants by knocking on the doors of a random selection of households within a community. Within communities, enumerators began recruitment activities either near heavily trafficked areas, such as markets, or near LEC transformers. We focused on these points of interest to reduce the chance of recruiting respondents to increase the chance that respondents had household connections to basic services or could access them communally.

- Once a month for six months, enumerators contacted respondents and administered a thirty minute-long mobile survey. Respondents were compensated for their participation. Enumerators would attempt re-contacting respondents no more than three times per day for three days. Respondents were removed from the panel and replaced if we could not contact them after three days.

B Common Causes of Service Shortages in Monrovia

We list common causes for service shortages below, based on conversation we had with service providers and our own observations during the fieldwork.

Solid waste services from the Monrovia City Corporation (MCC) can go short (e.g., no trash pickup) because (1) the MCC did not have enough resources or staff to perform scheduled cleaning; or (2) residents did not deposit waste in MCC bins.

Water services from the Liberian Water and Sewer Company (LWSC) can go short because (1) LWSC pipes broke; (2) drought; (3) mismanagement (e.g., LWSC incorrectly stops services for paying customers); and (4) illegal connections to LWSC pipes.

Electricity from the Liberia Electricity Corporation can go short because (1) LEC transformers/meters fail; (2) illegal connections to LEC transformers; (3) LEC fails to provide timely maintenance because international funding causes shortage of required supplies (e.g., transformers).

Adjustments to Data Collection

After COVID-19 emerged in Liberia, we adjusted our data collection protocols so that they complied with public health ordinances in Monrovia. Our research team at the Center for Action Research and Training (CART) in Monrovia made this decision collaboratively, acknowledging that the suspension of project activities posed a significant financial risk to project staff, many of whom rely on payment from the project as their primary source of income (approximately $200 USD/month). As other opportunities for employment in Liberia receded given the impact of COVID-19—e.g., the termination of other research activities that employed project staff—salaries from our project became the sole source of income for a majority CART's employees.

Specifically, we:

- Limited the number of enumerators working in the CART office to three. No more than three enumerators were allowed into the CART office at one time.

- Committed to halting data collection indefinitely if an enumerator displayed COVID-19 symptoms.

- Limited the length of the workday. To ensure that enumerators could easily comply with the government's public health order, we worked from 8AM to 12PM. Enumerators were compensated the same amount for each day of work, despite the shortened workday.

- Provided enumerators with personal protective equipment. Prior to entering the CART office, enumerators were required to use a CART-provided hand-washing station. Enumerators also received hand-sanitizer and a face mask for use throughout the workday.

- Physically separated enumerators in the CART office. Enumerators worked in separate rooms of the CART office to ensure that they remained at least six feet away from each other throughout the workday.

- Disinfected all project equipment and working areas at the end of each workday. The CART supervisor used Clorox to disinfect the phones, tablets, and working areas enumerators used during each workday. The CART manager wore gloves and a face mask while disinfecting workstations.

- Encouraged enumerators to travel on foot to the CART office, if possible.

- Provided enumerators a larger travel stipend to ensure that enumerators can take a private cab to and from the CART office if necessary.

C Qualitative Data Collection Activities

Block quotations for the qualitative evidence we include in the main text from the focus group discussions and interviews we conducted are listed below.

Focus Group Discussion 1: Jan-29-2020

- R2: "When there is no food for the citizen to eat, there will plenty noise behind the government. In other words, 'a hungry man is an angry man.' The reason why people are protesting in Liberia almost every month is that the government is not providing those basic services for her citizens."

- R4: "The good side of protest is that it calls government attention, and the bad side is properties can get damage."

- R4: "When government cannot provide services you need, you should continue to engage government or the agency that is responsible for providing that particular services that you are lack of."

- R5: "The government is preventing her citizens from accessing basic services. Those agencies that are responsible for distributing these services like LEC [Liberian Electricity Corporation], LWSC [Liberia Water and Sewer Company] and MCC [Monrovia City Corporation] are not being monitored by the government. As a result, they go about doing their own things, which is seriously affecting us. At times, you will have credits in your meter but your light will just go off, and to get LEC to come and repair your meter is like a war; the same with LWSC and MCC."

- R5: "The good side of protest is that result is immediate, and bad side is properties get damage, people get wounded in the process."

- R5: "When I cannot access services that government should be providing for me, like LEC I will be patient and wait for God and government time. While waiting I will in provides by buying my flash light to sleep on, secondly if it is water that I cannot get, I will get water from the community well, and for dirt I will bury my dirt under the ground."

Focus Group Discussion 2: Jan-31-2020, Seven Participants

- R2: "The benefit of protest is it tells the whole world the poor performance of a particular government. It also tells the government that there is an alarming situation in the country that needs to be attended to."

- R2: "Protest is not the best way to make change in Liberia. From our history, protest is not good for us. People always losing their lives in protest, properties damaged and protest also drive investors away."

- R4: "If the government is not providing services to us as citizens, we will protest to make them to know that it is their responsibility to provide these services to us."

Focus Group Discussion 3: Feb-03-2020, Seven Participants

- R3: "Protest can also bring the government to attention."

- R5: "The first thing is we will contact the government through our community chairperson. If there is no redress, we will protest."

- R6: "The benefit of protest is you can get quick result. The bad side of protest is people will get injured in the process, some may will lose their lives and property will be damaged."

Community Chairperson Interviews: Sep-2020

- Interview 1: In describing how he used a television interview about iron contamination in his community to get government assistance, he comments "The water has iron in it...Slowly, slowly, slowly, you be dying, you don't know. So that's it. It's so hard for me to get into contact with the government officials; I was so lucky that day when I did that interview and [was] surprised to see them in my community."

- Interview 1: Asked how the government treats him generally, he responds "The representative? District number eight? The man neglected the whole district. The man neglected the whole district."

- Interview 1: "That has been happening. I have taken two cases to the police; rape, attempted rape."

- Interview 1: "The community youth wanted to stage a protest to block the road. I told them 'No, under my leadership, you don't do that.'...So what we do, we engage the government constructively, and listen...I educate them. I tell you, if I go to meeting, if I go to LEC, I come from there...and use the town crier to make an announcement."

- Interview 1: "We can't stage protest. The issue here; protest has two-fold. And that fold is: one, positive, and two, negative. And the negative aspect is more severe than the positive aspect."

- Interview 1: "There are so many ways that you can engage the government, I really know that. That sitting in the street [i.e., protest] will not make government come in."

- Interview 2: "In general, you know, we have serious challenges, because sometimes government at the time you be in need of them, they will not respond to you immediately."

- Interview 2: "I think I would encourage my citizen, most especially those who are involved, to abide by the rules of law, to go through the investigation. Because, this country is a country of law; nobody is above it...I would encourage my citizens to always be law-abiding."
- Interview 2: "The people will have to speak [i.e. protest] through their constitutional guidance...You let them speak, but it should be in the confines of the law."
- Interview 3: "Well, you give the police a chance to do their investigation. You don't sabotage police operations."
- Interview 3: "That is their [i.e. citizens'] right to protest."
- Interview 4: "We educate our community to understand that alleged crime does not mean that the man is guilty, so you can't kill them. Because, in the past, our community was noted for beating on [suspects], killing [suspects]."
- Interview 4: "We would advise that protest is not the way, especially in this COVID-19 period...So the best way is dialogue."
- Interview 5: "We put it under control. There are people that are not satisfied with the government. But we don't; you know, the protest, it can bring chaos. So, we go to get a meeting and talk it."
- Interview 6: "When we have issues, we manage to channel [them] diplomatically...In other communities, they are throwing stones and taking placards."
- Interview 7: "If you see other communities protesting, it means that that chairperson is not guiding that particular community."

D Additional Robustness Checks

Diagnosis of Linear Interaction Effects

We refit our primary specification using the kernel smoothing estimator suggested in Hainmueller, Mummolo and Xu (2019), which allows us to flexibly estimate the functional form of the marginal effects of service shortages on willingness to protest across the full range of respondents' evaluations of community chairpeople. Figure D1b plots the results of a standard linear multiplicative interaction model next to the results of the kernel estimation. The marginal effects of service shortages on willingness to protest the kernel estimator fits over various evaluations of community chairpeople appear reasonably linear and mimic the conditional marginal effects generated using a linear multiplicative interaction model.

Figure D1a also demonstrates that there is fairly common support for our moderating variable across different values of treatment. Respondents' evaluations of their community chairperson vary from scores of 0 to 4. However, the majority of these responses are clustered around scores of 1 ("ineffective"/"self-interested") and ("effective"/"representative"), particularly among respondents who experience shortages in all three services.

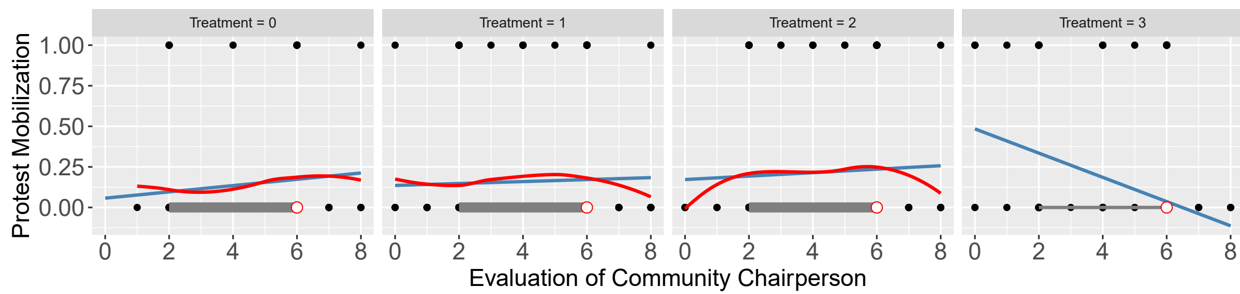
Reporting Errors

The conditional relationship between service shortages and protest mobilization we observe might be due to respondents systematically overstating the service shortages they experienced in the last month to "justify" their decision to protest. In anticipation of this challenge, the research team had designed a protocol to verify respondents' reports of service shortages.[7] However, this protocol was halted during the first month of implementation due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

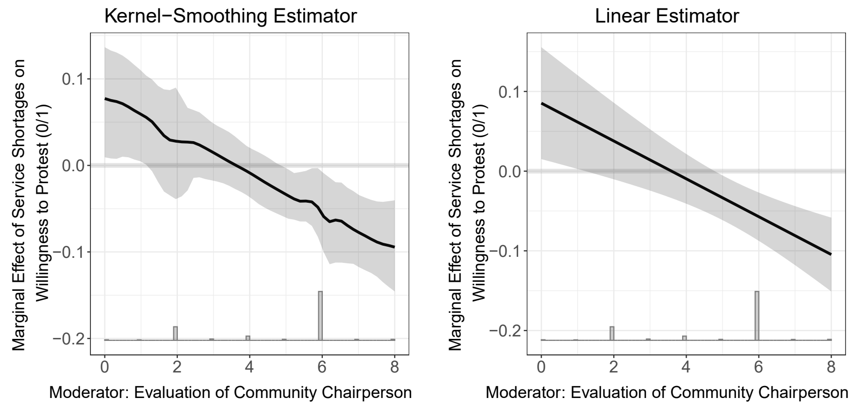
[7] The design of the survey instrument also minimizes this risk. Respondents are asked about their willingness to mobilize for protest after they report to enumerators whether they experienced shortages in electricity, water, and solid waste services in the previous month.

Figure D1: Linear Interaction Effect Diagnostics

(a) Respondents' evaluations of their community chairperson vary over different exposures to service shortages.



(b) The conditional effect of shortages on willingness to protest is plausibly linear.



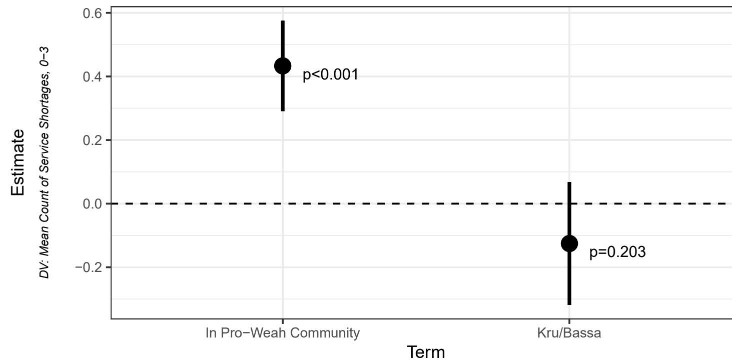
Note: figure generated using the interflex package in R. In Figure D1a, "treatment" is defined as the count of service respondents report having gone short in the past month; blue lines visualize the linear association between chairperson evaluations and willingness to protest at each level of treatment; and the red line visualize the association between chairperson evaluations and willingness to protest at each level of treatment using a kernel-smoothing estimator. We measure respondents' evaluations of community chairpeople as an index reflecting their effectiveness and inclusiveness.

As an alternative strategy, we explore whether the number of service shortages citizens report is positively correlated with other measures capturing their dissatisfaction with the government: their willing to protest, perceptions of government officials, and opposition to Liberian President George Weah. If reports of service shortages are systematically higher among respondents who are dissatisfied with the government, then our measure of service shortages may just reflect political attitudes rather than the objective material conditions of respondents.

To measure respondents' support for President Weah, we rely on two proxy variables: their ethnicity and their community. Specifically, we code respondents as supportive of President Weah if they are of the Kru or Bassa tribe or if they live in Popo Beach, Central West Point, Slipway, Vai Town, or Zondo Town. Members of the Kru and Bassa tribe constitute the bulk of support for the Weah administration. These citizens expressed continuous support for the President during the economic recession that has followed the onset of COVID-19 in Liberia and despite widespread discontent towards the government's COVID-19 response. The aforementioned communities are referred to as "slum communities" in Monrovia and were the main targets of the President's "Pro-Poor" campaign platform that saw him elected in 2018.

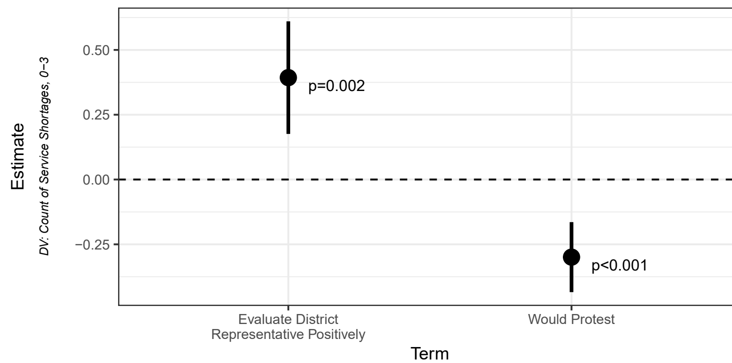
We find no evidence suggesting respondents who oppose the incumbent government report higher counts of service shortages per survey wave than do respondents who are not frustrated with the government (Figure D2). Respondents who are co-ethnics with President Weah do not report different counts of service shortages per month than do respondents who are not co-ethnics with President Weah. Moreover, respondents in Pro-Weah communities like Vai Town appear report slightly *more* service shortages per month than do respondents who do not reside in Pro-Weah communities. This pattern is inconsistent with concerns implying respondents' reports of service shortages reflect their frustration with the government rather than their living conditions.

Figure D2: Co-ethnicity and co-partisanship with the incumbent party does not predict overreporting of service shortages in the hypothesized direction.



Note: results from OLS regressions. All regressors are specified as dummy variables. Ninety-five percent confidence intervals are displayed.

Figure D3: Respondents' dissatisfaction with the government does not predict overreporting of service shortages in the hypothesized direction.



Note: results from OLS regressions. All regressors are specified as dummy variables. Ninety-five percent confidence intervals are displayed.

Broader indicators of citizens' dissatisfaction with the government similarly do not comport with concerns about reporting bias (Figure D3). Counterintuitively, respondent who state some willingness to protest report *fewer* counts of service shortages per month than do respondents who state no willingness to protest. Respondents who evaluate their district representative positively report *greater* exposure to service shortages than those who evaluate their representative negatively. We would expect the sign on each of these point estimates to be flipped if respondents were strategically over-reporting their experience of service shortages to justify their frustration with the government.

Design Effects and Attrition

To ensure that our findings are robust to design effects, we test whether the number of times that respondents participate in the survey predicts their willingness to mobilize for protest. We find no evidence that the number of times participants have been surveyed affects their willingness to mobilize for protest at the conventional level of statistical significance (SI Table E1).

We also investigate whether respondents who drop out from the panel over the study period (n=37) are meaningfully different from those who remain in the panel, since the same factors that might predict attrition could predict respondents' evaluations of their community chairperson, experience of service shortages, and willingness to mobilize for protest. To test whether attrition is plausibly exogenous, we test for balance among the variables used in our main analysis between respondents who dropped out of the panel and those who did not (see SI Table E2). We find that subjects who remain in our panel are comparable to those that drop out over the study period, along all of the variables we use in our main analysis.

E Additional Tables and Figures

Figure E1: Within and between-community variation in grievances and informal political opportunity.

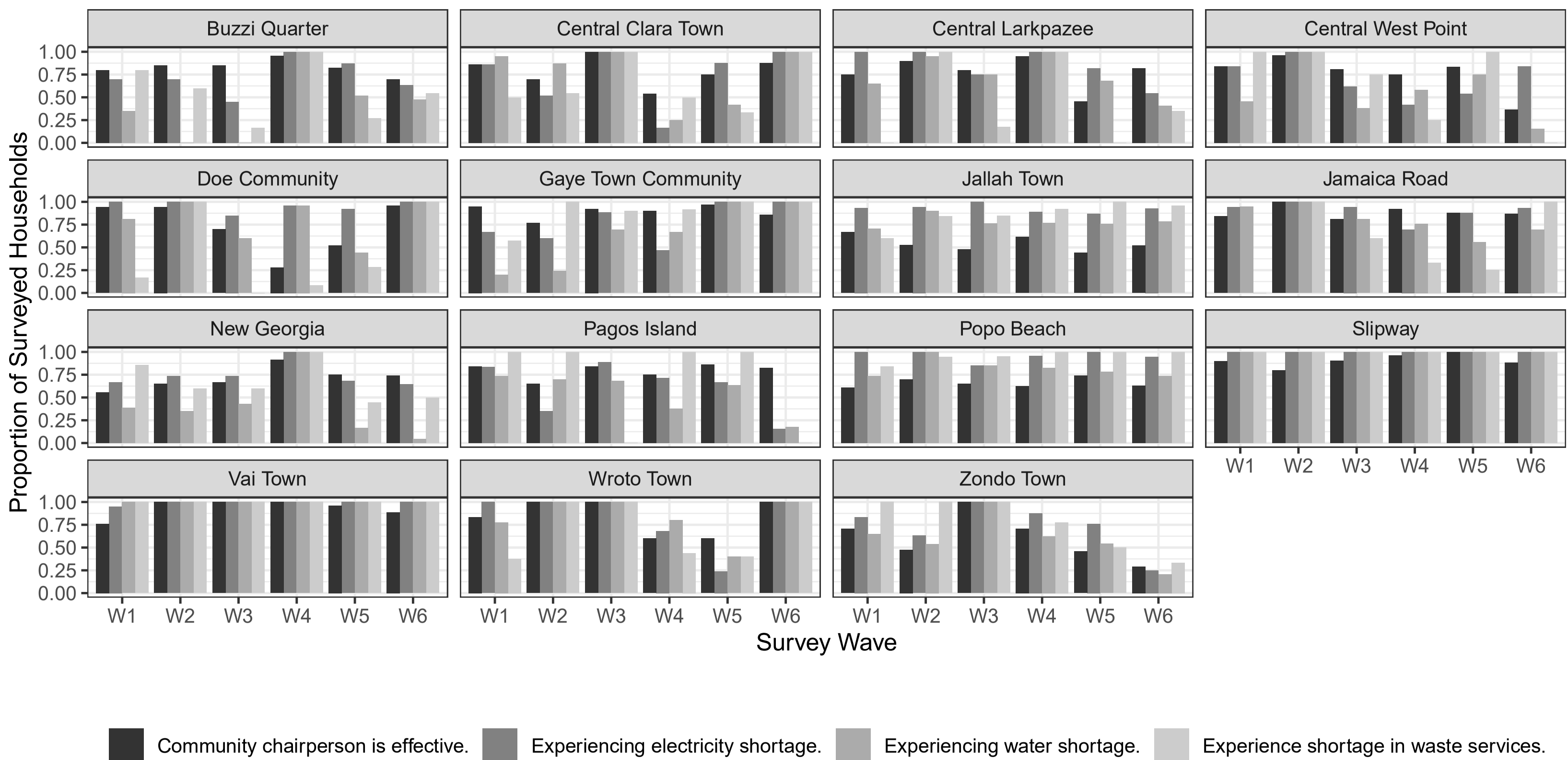


Table E1: Respondents are not more likely to express a willingness to mobilize for protest as they participate in additional panel waves.

	Estimate	Standard Error	N
Rounds Sampled	-0.07	0.09	2016

Note: $^{+}$ $p< 0.1$; * $p< 0.05$; ** $p< 0.01$; *** $p< 0.001$

Table E2: Balance between subjects who did and did not drop out of the panel.

Variable	Abs. Std. Mean Difference
Count of Shortages	0.01
Income	0.02
Willingness to Protest	0.03
Believe Repression is Likely	0.04
Evaluation of District Representative	0.05
Protest Effective	0.06
Expressive Benefits from Protest	0.07
Evaluation of Community Chairperson	0.09

Table E3: Summary Statistics, Survey Measures

Group	Variable	Mean	Min	Max	SD	N
Protest	Willingness to Protest	0.13	0.00	1.00	0.34	2016
Service Shortages	Count	2.04	0.00	3.00	1.03	2014
	One Shortage	0.90	0.00	1.00	0.30	2014
	Two Shortages	0.69	0.00	1.00	0.46	2014
	Three Shortages	0.45	0.00	1.00	0.50	2014
	Electricity Shortage	0.83	0.00	1.00	0.38	1927
	Water Shortage	0.72	0.00	1.00	0.45	1988
	Solid Waste Shortage	0.79	0.00	1.00	0.41	1363
Elite Evaluations	Community Chairperson	5.01	0.00	8.00	1.73	2003
	District Representative	4.07	0.00	8.00	2.06	2005
Covariates	Efficacy of Protest	1.86	0.00	4.00	0.97	2013
	Expressive Benefits of Protest	0.31	0.00	1.00	0.46	2015
	Income	2.90	0.00	9.00	1.85	2012
	Repression Likely	0.48	0.00	1.00	0.50	1809

Table E4: Main Results; Community Chairpeople, Service Shortages, and Protest

	DV: Willingness to Protest (0/1)		
	(A)	(B)	(C)
Service Shortages (0-3)	0.09*	0.10*	0.04
	(0.03)	(0.04)	(0.03)
Evaluation of Community Chairperson (0-8)	0.03	0.03	
	(0.02)	(0.02)	
Evaluation of District Representative (0-8)	−0.01	0.01	
	(0.01)	(0.01)	
Positive Evaluation, Community Chairperson (0/1)			0.09
			(0.07)
Positive Evaluation, District Representative (0/1)			−0.03
			(0.06)
Positive Evaluation, Both Elites (0/1)			0.11
			(0.08)
Expect Repression (0/1)	0.01	0.01	0.01
	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.04)
Protest Effective (0/1)	0.05***	0.05***	0.05***
	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)
Social Obligation to Protest (0/1)	−0.07	−0.07	−0.07
	(0.05)	(0.05)	(0.05)
Income (0-9)	0.01	0.01	0.01
	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)
Shortages×Evaluation of Chairperson	−0.02**	−0.02**	
	(0.01)	(0.01)	
Shortages×Evaluation of Representative		−0.01	
		(0.01)	
Shortages×Evaluate Chairperson Positively			−0.08**
			(0.03)
Shortages×Evaluate Representative Positively			−0.03
			(0.03)
Shortages×Evaluate Both Elites Positively			−0.11**
			(0.03)
R^2	0.47	0.48	0.48
Adj. R^2	0.32	0.32	0.32
Num. obs.	1795	1795	1799
N Clusters	15	15	15

Note: $^{***}p < 0.001$; $^{**}p < 0.01$; $^{*}p < 0.05$

Table E5: Omitted Variable Bias Sensitivity Analysis Reporting

Outcome: *Willingness to Protest (0/1)*

Treatment:	Est.	S.E.	t-value	$R^2_{Y\sim D\|\mathbf{X}}$	$RV_{q=1}$	$RV_{q=1,\alpha=0.05}$
Shortage × *Chairperson*	-0.024	0.005	-4.917	1.7%	12.3%	7.6%
df = 1392			*Bound (1x effective.prot)*: $R^2_{Y\sim Z\|\mathbf{X},D} = 2\%$, $R^2_{D\sim Z\|\mathbf{X}} = 2\%$			

Figure E2: Sample Demographics

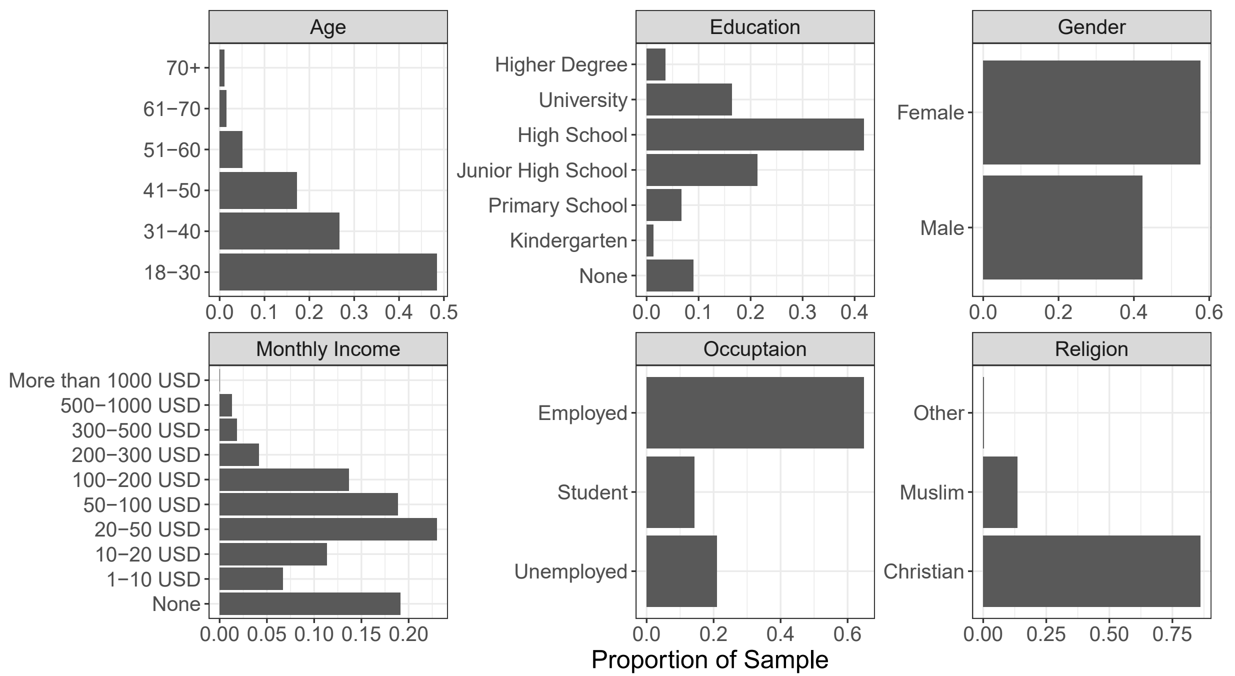
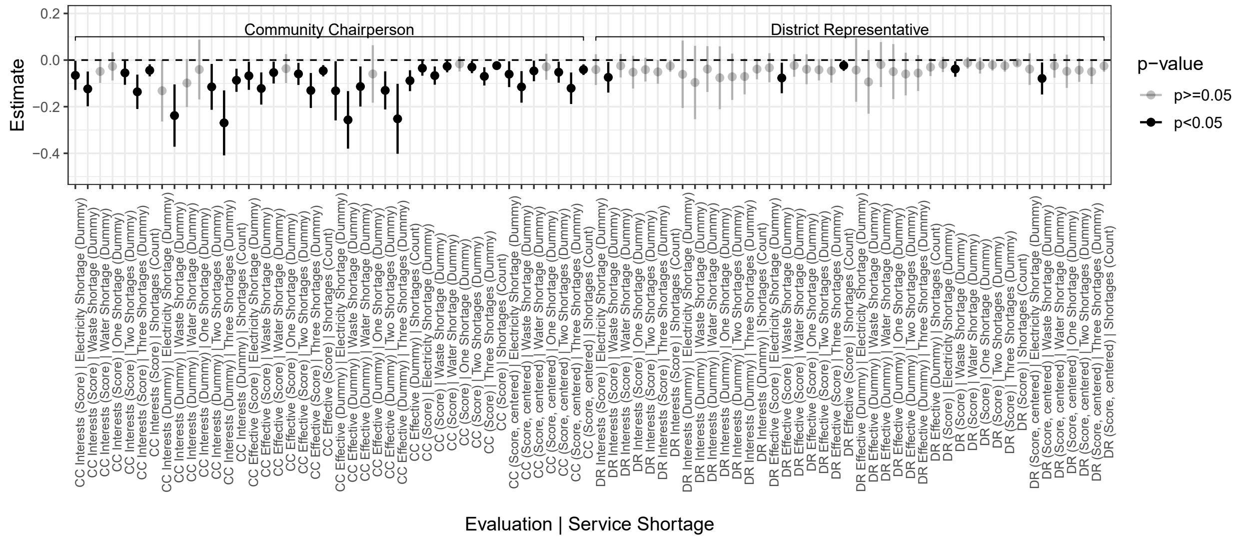
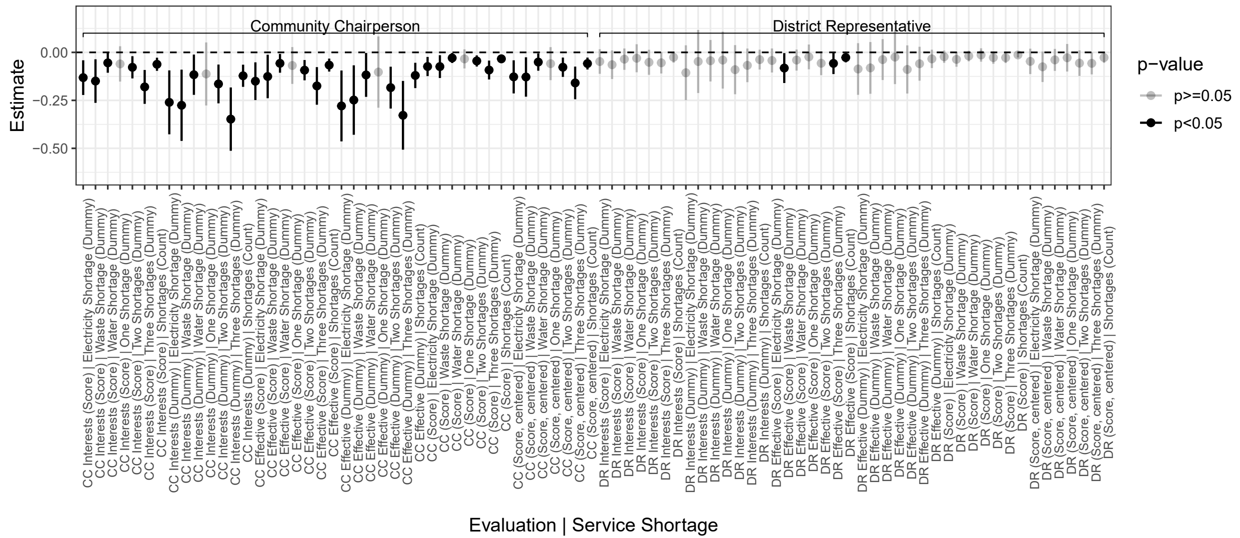


Figure E3: Various Specifications of Main Results

(a) Protest Mobilization as a Dummy Variable



(b) Protest Mobilization as an Index Score



Note: each point estimate corresponds to the service shortage-elite evaluation interaction (see γ_3 in estimating equation) from a single estimation. The constitutive terms of this interaction, and how they are operationalized, are listed on the x-axis. Black point estimates are significant at the 5-percent level and transparent estimates are not statistically significant. This figure demonstrates that the main results presented in E4 are not extremely sensitive to various measurement strategies.

F Data Availability Statement

Upon publication, the authors will provide a replication file containing all data and code required to reproduce the results reported in this manuscript. The replication file will be available for download via the Harvard Dataverse.